

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 8, 2024

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer, Speaker Johnson, Leader McConnell, and Leader Jeffries:

As you consider a comprehensive disaster supplemental appropriations bill, we urge you to include funding for the National Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) Response System task forces, which have played a key role in responding to the most recent disasters, including Hurricanes Milton and Helene.

In just the past two months, US&R task forces from around the country deployed across the Southeast, including to Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina, where they led rescue efforts following Hurricanes Helene and Milton.^{1,2} Task forces deployed from Alabama,³ California,⁴ Colorado,⁵ and elsewhere across the country. As soon as they got the call, first responders from each task force left their own communities to travel across the country to help people they had

¹ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *FEMA and Partners Respond to Hurricane Helene Across the Southeast*, September 28, 2024, <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20240928/fema-and-partners-respond-hurricane-helene-across-southeast>.

² Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Biden-Harris Administration Assisting with Seven Major Disaster Declarations Across Southeast Following Helene and Milton*, October 12, 2024, <https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20241012/biden-harris-administration-assisting-seven-major-disaster-declarations>.

³ Baillee Majors, *Alabama's Task Force One Urban Search & Rescue Team deploys in wake of Hurricane Helene*, Alabama Public Radio, September 28, 2024, <https://www.apr.org/news/2024-09-28/alabamas-task-force-one-urban-search-rescue-team-deploys-in-wake-of-hurricane-helene>.

⁴ State of California, *California deploys Urban Search and Rescue Task Force teams ahead of Hurricane Milton*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2024/10/07/california-deploys-urban-search-and-rescue-task-force-teams-ahead-of-hurricane-milton/>.

⁵ Lindsey Toomer, *Colorado first responders return home after weeks supporting hurricane rescue efforts*, Florida Phoenix, October 30, 2024, <https://floridaphoenix.com/2024/10/30/colorado-first-responders-return-home-after-weeks-supporting-hurricane-rescue-efforts/>.

never met. This system and those who make it work are inspiring examples of how Americans come together in times of crisis.

US&R task forces have been heroically responding to national disasters for more than 35 years. Operating under the authority of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), it is made up of 28 task forces based in 19 states around the country. Each task force is staffed by federal, state and local emergency response agencies that are on call for rapid deployment by FEMA to respond to disasters. Once on site, task force members provide a wide variety of aid ranging from rescue operations to emergency medical care, operating round the clock in dangerous, life-threatening situations.

In addition, US&R task forces have deployed to some of the most catastrophic and consequential disasters in our nation's history, including the Northridge Earthquake in Los Angeles County in 1994, the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the September 11th attacks in New York and D.C. in 2001, Hurricane Sandy along the East Coast in 2012, and the wildfires in Maui, Hawaii, in 2023, among many others. Recently, US&R task force members deployed in Orange and Riverside counties in response to the Airport Fire, which burned over 23,500 acres in Southern California.⁶

We have been asking the task forces to respond to an increasing number of disasters for years with the same amount of funding. We were pleased that the House recently adopted a Floor amendment to increase US&R's funding level in FY25.⁷ However, this increase would merely enable the task forces to meet their existing obligations – to be ready to deploy anywhere in the country at any time – without further straining local government budgets. Even if the House-passed funding level were to become law, it would not be sufficient to meet the task forces' long-standing capital needs. The task forces currently operate with outdated vehicles and equipment because they have not had the funding to replace them.

A 2018 FEMA report to Congress examined US&R response requirements, task force preparedness, and existing and emerging equipment capability requirements. FEMA developed a comprehensive plan that, if fully funded, would help task forces replace outdated equipment and vehicles.⁸ Such a recapitalization of assets is an essential element to ensure system-wide readiness. The stability of the US&R program – and therefore the task forces' ability to respond effectively to disasters – is put at risk when task forces do not have the equipment they need. Six years later, Congress has thus far funded only a portion of the 2018 plan. Adjusted for inflation, the US&R System still requires \$21.6 million to meet its deferred capital needs.

To that end, as you consider a supplemental funding bill, **we respectfully request \$21.6 million in additional funding for the US&R System** separate and apart from its full fiscal year funding needs. Without such funding, we put US&R task force personnel at greater risk from aging and obsolete equipment, and we reduce the effectiveness of search and rescue efforts. Please consider additional funding to meet the needs of this critical, life-saving program that supports all communities in times of crisis.

⁶ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *California Airport Fire*, FM-5538-CA, last updated September 24, 2024, <https://www.fema.gov/disaster/5538>.

⁷ H.Amdt.1012 to H.R.8752, agreed to by voice vote on June 26, 2024.

⁸ Federal Emergency Management Agency, *National US&R Response System Equipment Plan, Fiscal Year 2017 Report to Congress*, June 6, 2018, prepared pursuant to Sec. 327 of Pub. L. No. 114-326.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,



Kevin Mullin
Member of Congress



JM Tokuda
Member of Congress



Young Kim
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress



Seth Moulton
Member of Congress



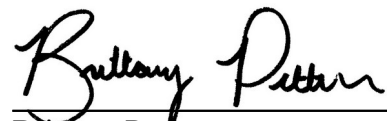
Scott H. Peters
Member of Congress



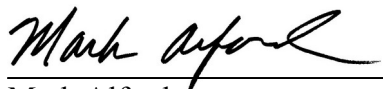
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cc:

Hon. Tom Cole, Chair, House Appropriations Committee

Hon. Patty Murray, Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee

Hon. Rosa DeLauro, Ranking Member, House Appropriations Committee

Hon. Susan Collins, Vice Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee